

The worst weather brings out the best in MoDOT

Weather Warriors

The First Wave

Late in the afternoon of April 25, the skies darkened, the wind howled and violent tornadoes tore through several counties in southeast Missouri. For nearly two hours, the National Weather Service issued warning after warning for tornadoes and severe thunderstorms. Officials estimate one tornado's path stretched from a half-mile to a mile wide and 20 to 25 miles long in Butler County.

That tornado left behind many injuries in a Poplar Bluff subdivision and only a few homes. In Marquand, the fire department, a restaurant and city hall were hit hard. MoDOT's local maintenance facility was one of only a few buildings left standing in the small town.

But before the winds calmed, MoDOT's maintenance crews were out in full force.

"I was actually under my house on the phone with the highway patrol as the tornado was going over," says Maintenance Superintendent Butch Anderson. "As soon as I could, I was calling my crews and getting the equipment ready."

Anderson says his crews found roads closed by fallen trees and scattered debris – including bathtubs. At one spot, asphalt from a driveway had been sucked up and thrown onto the road.

"We were detouring traffic, clearing the debris off the roadway and assisting the emergency management folks," Anderson says. "We had all the roads reopened at about 11 that night."

It's simply a matter of experience, says Area Engineer Lindell Huskey, based in Poplar Bluff. "So much was happening and our folks just went to work and did their jobs."

The Second Wave

Crews worked tirelessly to get everything cleaned up, but Mother Nature wasn't helping. That weekend, more destructive tornadoes and storms passed through southeast Missouri. This time, Marble Hill and Bollinger County were hit hardest.

"I actually heard about it on the scanner," says Maintenance Superintendent Kenny Allen. "I called the highway patrol to double check and then called the crews."

MoDOT crews direct traffic after the storm



Allen's crews began the task of clearing the roads at midnight.

"We worked heavily with the emergency services because there were so many people who were hurt and stranded on some of the county roads," Allen says. "They asked for our help to be able to get to them."

By 9 a.m. Sunday, the crews had cleared most of the major state routes and county roads for emergency vehicles. Next began the process of clearing off the right of way.

What's Next?

Wind and hail caused most of the destruction during the storms, but heavy rains caused the silent damage – flash floods,

Johnson says as the flooding began, crews literally were out chasing the water.

"Our people would put up signs at the north end of the road and as the water moved down the route, they'd have to move the signs," he says.

"We were lucky not to have the storm damage other areas did," says Maintenance Superintendent Jim Menz, based in Jackson. "But, we had five inches of rain, twice."

Menz and Allen spent much of their time at Dutchtown, where the Mississippi's Headwater Diversion Channel left the banks and headed to Routes 74 and 25.

"At one time, I had 10 roads closed in my area. We worked 16-hour days, but we did that day after day for about a week."

Kenny Allen, maintenance superintendent

coupled with a rising Mississippi River. All the water spelled danger for the area.

"This was different," says Area Engineer Stan Johnson, based in Jackson. "We had the flash floods at the same time the river was rising. The flash floods couldn't get away because the river was already backed up."

The water had to go somewhere and over roads seemed to be the place.

"I have no idea how many 'Water Over Road' signs we put out," Allen says. "At one time, I had 10 roads closed in my area. We worked 16-hour days, but we did that day after day for about a week."

Levee at Dutchtown



Flooding at Dutchtown

As if the flooding over the roads wasn't bad enough, falling trees provided additional challenges for MoDOT maintenance crews. In fact, nine trees fell across a seven-mile stretch of road in one night.

Storms, Floods And Traffic Jams

Besides damage from storms and water, MoDOT had to deal with a unique problem developing on Interstate 55 in Cape Girardeau County. The interstate was reduced to one lane in each direction because of the Diversion Channel Bridge replacement project. Routes 74 and 25 were serving as alternate roadways. But with that thoroughfare closed because of water, all the regular interstate traffic as well the normal Route 25 traffic was pushed to the interstate.

"To say we had traffic backups might be an understatement," says Johnson. "We had about a 10-mile backup on the interstate on Tuesday, May 14. We knew we had to do something."

The plan was to close the South Kingshighway on-ramp on Wednesday to eliminate a spot where three lanes of traffic were

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Water and More Water

Clearwater Lake reached an all-time high, stopping less than six inches short of going over its spillway. And Lake Wappapello, which has a spillway of 394.74 feet, crested at 395.13 feet, the second highest in history.

On Saturday, May 18, MoDOT had to close a portion of Route 67 near Greenville. The last time water had overflowed the roadway was in 1945.

"Crews were out all night Friday placing barricades and signs so that we could close the road as quickly as possible," Huskey says. "We closed the road the next day and began to reroute traffic. It was a very coordinated effort."

Moving barriers on Interstate 55 near Cape Girardeau



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attempting to merge into one lane. If traffic merged sooner, interstate traffic would begin moving again. To some extent the plan worked.

“We still had traffic backed up, but the interstate was beginning to move more,” Johnson says.



Lake Wappapello rose to flood stage

Of course, taking one of Cape Girardeau’s four interchanges out of commission had its effects on the city. Traffic was backed up through town as commuters tried to make their way south.

It was obvious that the only thing that could fix the traffic congestion was another lane going south. Johnson says everyone began brainstorming.

“It’s easy to say, just fix it,” Johnson says. “But, you have to keep in mind, there are standards we have to follow.”

The project team decided to make the one southbound lane into two lanes. The concrete barrier would be moved slightly, and the shoulder and one lane of traffic would be restriped to make two lanes.

“We were very worried about the shoulders, but knew we had to take the risk,” Johnson says. “If we were going to be out there ev-

ery day fixing the shoulders, then we’d just have to be out there every day fixing the shoulders.”

On Saturday morning, May 18, MoDOT and contractor crews went to work on the new traffic plan. The contractor began moving the barricades, and MoDOT’s maintenance forces began working on the shoulder, strengthening it as much as possible.

“We had a lot to think about,” Johnson says, such as the project in progress, the strength of the bridge, changing the striping and accommodating oversized loads on narrow lanes.

He adds, “I don’t think we could have done it with another contractor. Penzel Construction worked well with us and did whatever we wanted to try.” Also, Delta As-

phalt, normally closed on Saturday, opened just for MoDOT.

But nothing helped more than everyone’s cooperation and willingness to work together.

“MoDOT design and construction coordinated the plan and procurement helped us get materials,” Johnson says. “Maintenance continued to put in long hours and public information got the word out.”

The Southeast District Customer Service Center “took a lot of heated phone calls,” Johnson says, and stayed open extended hours. The center logged nearly 2,000 phone calls in May, about double the average monthly number.

All the hard work paid off when traffic started moving and the shoulders held up just fine.

Couldn’t Have Done It Without You

“I have seen it in the floods of 1993 and 1995, and the extreme weather events this year,” says District Engineer Scott Meyer. “Every time, our people do the incredible in a sincere, quiet manner. When asked, they will almost always say, ‘We just did what needed to be done.’”

However, the true value of what MoDOT crews did in southeast Missouri last spring can only be measured by asking, what if they didn’t?

“That is a scary thought,” Meyer says. “Lives depended upon it.” ■

Tonya Wells is an outreach specialist in MoDOT’s Southeast District.

Epilogue

Dutchtown residents received good news this summer. The town will receive a federal community-development block grant to build a levee that will prevent water from the Mississippi River Headwater Diversion Channel from entering the community, like it did this spring. The 12-foot-high, 2-mile-long levee will be completed in December 2004 and will cost more than \$900,000.

Although endless hours of sandbagging will become a thing of the past, Dutchtown residents put in thousands of hours to make the levee a reality. They raised \$25,000 in grant matching funds through bake sales and local fundraisers and donations.

Besides saving Dutchtown, the new levee will have a positive impact on transportation, keeping vital roadways open so residents, commuters and emergency services personnel can travel freely and safely – even during bad weather.